

Creating a Medieval Spatial Myth: Perception of the Body on the Alischanz Battlefield

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Abstract: It has been noted that in the Middle Ages space and time were considered not as abstractions, but in concrete terms: thus, the bond between man's body and nature determined his perception of space, as space was measured by the human body. In this paper, I will discuss the extent to which, in the medieval narrative, the perception of space is achieved through the body; I will do this by analysing the spatial dimensions of the battlefield in one of the major epic poems of the German courtly period, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Willehalm*. The organization of space in this work is characterised by specifically medieval thinking patterns: thus, in keeping with courtly literary convention (in which topographical and 'naturalistic' elements have a very specific, often symbolic meaning), Wolfram does not describe the battlefield landscape in any great detail. In his text, the space of the battlefield is primarily constituted through the perception of the knight's body: thus, the poet makes use of the warriors' senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste in order to provide spatial meaning – and to create a spatial myth.

Keywords: Middle Ages, Narrative, Space, Body, Senses

Resumo: Tem sido observado que, na Idade Média, o espaço e tempo eram considerados não em termos abstratos, mas em termos concretos: assim, a ligação entre o corpo e a natureza determinava a percepção do espaço, na medida em que o espaço era medido pelo corpo humano. Neste artigo, vou discutir a forma como, na narrativa medieval, a percepção do espaço é conseguida através do corpo; farei isso analisando as dimensões espaciais do campo de batalha num dos grandes poemas épicos do período cortês, o *Willehalm* de

Wolfram von Eschenbach. A organização do espaço nesta obra é caracterizada por padrões de pensamento especificamente medievais: assim, de acordo com a convenção cortês (em que elementos topográficos e "naturalistas" têm um significado muito específico, frequentemente simbólico), Wolfram não descreve a paisagem do campo de batalha com grande pormenor. No seu texto, o espaço do campo de batalha é construído principalmente através da percepção do corpo do cavaleiro: assim, o poeta refere-se aos sentidos (à visão, à audição, ao tato, ao olfato e ao paladar) dos guerreiros, a fim de lhes dar um significado espacial - e de criar um mito espacial.

Palavras-chave: Idade Média, Narrativa, Espaço, Corpo, Sentidos

Traditional definitions of the medieval narrative have characterised it primarily as the representation of a sequence of events; however, it is clear that these events are situated in space and thus narratives do imply a world with spatial extension. The recognition of this fact has, in the last 50 years, led to a 'spatial turn', with a notable shift in critical attention in the analysis of medieval literary texts from the category of time to that of space.

In this article, I would like to investigate a significant aspect within the discussion of space in the medieval narrative, that of its corporeality. Scholarship has long debated the question of the role which space played in the Middle Ages (and we have long known that the medieval perception of space was very different from our own): an important voice here was that of the medievalist Aaron J. Gurevich who argued that in the Middle Ages there were no unified categories of space and time, but that these were considered in concrete terms and not as abstractions, as they are in modernity; thus the body was of central importance in medieval man's relationship with his natural environment, with space, and in his perception of it (Gurevich 1985: 53). Although, for Gurevich, man in the Middle Ages was no longer merged into nature, as had been the case in earlier societies, he did not stand in conscious opposition to it, as he does today (*Idem*: 54). Thus, the bond between man's body and nature determined his perception of space, since man was the measure of all things, and, above all, of his own space (*Idem*: 55).

Basing her considerations on the Swiss-Canadian medievalist Paul Zumthor's study of the perception of space in medieval literature and the corporeality of spatial experience, Ingrid Kasten, has recently noted that space in the medieval romance is conceptualised in corporeal terms and codified as such: the body is space, it moves in space and it is the centre of spatial perception – and for that reason we speak of, for example, a 'sense of space.'¹

Within the framework of criticism in Middle High German poetry, a significant body of work has been published in recent years which provides some new perspectives on the constitutive importance of space in courtly narrative texts. Of particular interest in this discussion are the results of Christina Lechtermann's recent studies on the role of the body for the conception of space (cf. Lechtermann, 2005 and 2014). Lechtermann has analysed the literary representations of hierarchy at court and has noted the significance of the choreography of the monarch's body since it is the movement of his body which constitutes space at court: in her 2005 discussion she analysed the presence of the Emperor in works such as the German version of the *Chanson de Roland* (*Rolandslied*) and demonstrated how his presence gives the space in the poem meaning (Lechtermann 2005: 175ff.). In my own analysis I would like to develop further Lechtermann's approach and examine the extent to which the *perception* of the body plays a role in the construction of space not in the context of the court, but within the fictional universe of the battle narrative.² In this discussion I will be concentrating on the description of a military encounter in one of the most important and enigmatic works of the German Middle Ages, Wolfram von Eschenbach's anti-war epic *Willehalm*. In my analysis, I will examine in detail the first battle scene of the poem: I will thereby ascertain the extent to which it is the perception of the body which constitutes this space – and through this establishment of meaning, creates a spatial myth, both within the poem itself, and also within the context of its medieval reception.

Wolfram's fragmentary anti-war epic *Willehalm* is based on the Old French *chanson de geste Bataille d'Aliscans*, which is part of the Guillaume-Cycle: it describes the holy war between West and East, between Christianity and Islam, during the time of the *reconquista*. The story which Wolfram tells in this poem is of Willehalm and his wife Gyburg – both

characters based on historical figures. In Wolfram's poem, Gyburg, who used to be called Queen Arabel and was married to a Muslim king, falls in love with the Christian Willehalm, deserts her husband and her children, is baptised and takes up residence with Willehalm in Orange, in Provence. A massive Muslim army, led by King Terramer, who is Arabel/Gyburg's father, invades Provence with the intention of seeking revenge, by killing Gyburg and Willehalm and destroying Christendom. The poem describes two battles fought between Muslims and Christians on the battlefield at Alischanz, one at the beginning of the narrative and the other at the end. In both of these battles Willehalm is the Christian leader. During the first encounter the Christian defenders are slaughtered by their Muslim opponents and Willehalm is forced to retreat as one of the last survivors of his defeated army; after returning to Orange, he must leave his wife alone to defend their castle which is then besieged by the enemy. Willehalm makes his way to the French court in Munleun (Laon) in order to secure military backing from his brother-in-law, the French King Louis. Once assembled, the French army makes its way to Orange and, in the ensuing second battle on the field at Alischanz, the Christians finally vanquish their Muslim foe. At the moment of victory, the Christian leader is magnanimous and, in a noble gesture, not only frees his enemy prisoners, but also makes sure the enemy dead are taken home in order to be buried according to the Muslim rite. The German poem is, as already noted, a fragment and (frustratingly) breaks off at this point.

In *Willehalm*, as in the source material, the first battle sees a small army of Christian defenders being overrun and massacred by the Muslim invader: the topography of the battlefield and the landscape surrounding it are not described in any detail by Wolfram, as, in keeping with courtly convention, such descriptions are not a major aesthetic-literary concern: he refers to the hills and valleys surrounding the field, to the noise and dust of battle, but does not provide any further details of the environment.

The battlefield is primarily endowed with its spatial quality through its relationship to those courtly bodies which are active on it, i.e. – those of the knights. Remarkably, however, the fighting on the battlefield is not dominated by the Christian commander, Willehalm. The leader of the Christian army is one of the very few who will escape from the

battlefield with his life: tens of thousands die on Alischanz, but not the Christian commander. As one of the small number of Christian survivors, Willehalm cannot 'represent' and characterize a space which is fundamentally one of defeat, of sacrifice and of death in the defence of a Christian ideal. Thus, the battlefield space is in fact constituted and constructed not by Willehalm, but by a paradigmatic Christian martyr, the young and innocent Vivianz – Willehalm's nephew, his sister's son, who is no more than a child. It is notable that after Willehalm has given a rousing speech to his troops at the very beginning of the battle (17,25ff.), explaining to them the religious motivation for their impending encounter and giving them the reasons why they should fight to the death, the Christian commander disappears from view and is only seen again when the battle is practically over – and already lost (cf. 51,1ff.).

There is no suggestion of cowardice on Wolfram's part, but by allowing Willehalm to melt into the background of the battlefield as it were, Wolfram is able to concentrate on the action of the child Vivianz, to put him in the foreground and make sure that he – and not Willehalm – is visually at the centre-stage: it is Vivianz' action and sacrifice which will be seen by the other knights on the battlefield, not Willehalm's. Vivianz becomes the dominant optical manifestation during the fighting and it is this which will ensure that it is he and his action which will give meaning to Alischanz as a space: Vivianz will thus determine the audience's perception of the battlefield.

After the encounter has got underway, Vivianz bursts onto the scene, attacking the heathen knight Noupatis:

*gein dem kom Vivianz.
Des marchgraven swester sun,
der kunde ouch werdekeit wol tuon.
sus was bewart sin clariu jugent:
dehein ort an siner tugent
was ninder mosec noch murc (22,30ff.).*

[Riding towards him came Vivianz, the son of the margrave's sister. He knew how to acquit himself with honour too. His pure youth was preserved in such a way that his virtue was not the least bit blotched or blighted].

He immediately kills the heathen, but in so doing, is himself also mortally wounded, as his opponent's weapon, a bejewelled lance-banner, adorned with pictures of the heathen god Amor, pierces his body, thrusting his entrails out onto his saddle. The young Vivianz seems unperturbed by this: he binds his entrails back in place, as if he feels no pain. Vivianz is made into the focal point of the battle, since this exemplary bravery is, the narrator notes, *seen* by the other Christian knights on the field, when they come to his assistance. Subsequently, despite his fatal wound, Vivianz again sets out into the fray. Although weakened, he still fights on and once again his example is *seen* by his fellow Christian warriors. The noise of the advancing heathens frightens one of the Christian counts, Bertram and he is about to retreat when he *hears* Vivianz' battle-cry ('*Munschoy!*') and sees him fighting to the death – and this emboldens him to such an extent that he goes back into fray:

*do gehort der kurtoyse
Munschoy kreieren
in den rivieren
und sach ouch Viviansen streben
nach tode als er niht wold leben.
Bertram do strits ernande (41,26).*

[Then that chivalrous knight heard someone crying 'Monjoie!' from the direction of the river and saw Vivianz striving for death, as if he did not want to live. Bertram summoned his courage for battle].

Vivianz' heroic acts are seen and heard not only by the other Christian warriors, but also by the enemy: the narrator notes how he is so successful at killing Muslims that one of the heathen leaders, Halzebier, on seeing and hearing him battling so enthusiastically, singles him out, and knocks him unconscious with his sword (42,15ff.).

It is clear, therefore, that the child-figure of Vivianz and his desire to fight to the death determine the way in which the audience perceive the space at Alischanz, both from

an acoustic and visual standpoint. Thus, the battlefield at Alischanz only achieves a truly spatial quality through the presence and action of Vivianz' courtly body: this occurs in the first part of the battlefield action on an optical and an acoustic level.

Alischanz is, however, more than just a battlefield: it is above all to become a space associated with Christian martyrdom. This qualitative valuation of its spatial importance imbues Alischanz with a transcendental significance which also depends, in the final analysis, on Vivianz' body – as Vivianz' death is paradigmatic, representative of all the Christian losses on the battlefield (Greenfield 1992: 142). Vivianz' death has the motivation of any Christian martyrdom: he sacrifices his life – like Jesus before him – so that the souls of the Christian community might be saved. As the narrator notes: *(...) Vivians der lobes rich / sich selben verkouft umb unseren segen* (48,11f.) [(...) the highly praised Vivianz sacrificed his life for our salvation]. It is also the wide-ranging, sensory perception of the **death** of the young and innocent child-warrior which will bring about a semantic expansion of the Alischanz space.

The description Wolfram provides of this death emphasizes the metaphysical quality of the martyr's body: Vivianz' earthly passing will link the space of the battlefield to that of Paradise. This is underlined by the type of supernatural elements which are introduced by Wolfram as Vivianz is dying, thus modifying the character of the battlefield, as it now – through Vivianz – also becomes an earthly representation of Heaven. This is underlined, among other elements, by the presence of celestial beings and by the surroundings which they lead Vivianz to.

As was noted above, during the fighting the child was knocked unconscious by the Muslim overlord Halzebier; once he regains consciousness he is guided by angels towards an isolated place on the battlefield, up a river where there is a quiet and shady spring surrounded by poplar and linden trees: the dynamic of the battlefield, characterised by Vivianz' violent movement is now replaced by an almost static environment reminiscent of a classical *locus amoenus* (Greenfield/ Miklautsch 1998: 76). The Archangel Kerubin approaches Vivianz and tells him that he will see his uncle Willehalm before he dies. This indeed is the case: as the battle nears its end, and Willehalm is making his way back to

Orange, he finds his nephew's half-dead body by the spring. He thinks that Vivianz is already dead and laments his loss.

Significantly, in order to underline the transcendental character which the battlefield now assumes, the poet lets his audience perceive Vivianz through Willehalm's senses, and in so doing broadens the sensory base by which the martyr's body defines the battlefield. It was noted above that, while he was fighting, Vivianz dominated the battlefield and gave meaning to the environment around him both optically and acoustically through his dynamic action (i.e. his fellow combatants saw him fighting and heard him shouting); now, at his death scene, which is a static part of his action, his uncle's senses become involved and it is his perception of Vivianz' body which will further determine the (metaphysical) nature of the scene. But here not only are the senses of sight and hearing brought into play, as Wolfram now allows Willehalm to use the other three senses: taste, smell and touch.

While Willehalm is lamenting the loss of his young nephew, he touches him: he takes his wounded head upon his lap and caresses it (cf. 61,28ff.). The touch of Vivianz' body emotionally charges him and reminds him of his nephew's past. He then goes on to recall how his nephew's body was always sweet:

*sôlh süeze an dime libe lac:
des breiten mers salzes smac
müese al zuckermæzic sin,
der din eine zehen würfe drin (62,11ff.)*

[There was such sweetness in your body that the salty taste of the broad sea would surely have become as sweet as sugar if just one of your toes had been thrown into it].

Vivianz' body would have turned the salty taste of the sea sweet. Furthermore, Willehalm then goes on to notice the sweet odour emanating from his moribund nephew:

*als pigment und amer
din süeze wunden smeckent,
die mir daz herze erstreckent
daz ez nach jamer swillet. (62,16ff.)*

[Your sweet wounds exude the fragrance of spice and ambergris, filling my heart and making it swell with sorrow].

In thus also allowing the senses of touch, taste and smell to be used in this way, Wolfram has amplified the effect which Willehalm's perception of Vivianz' body has on defining the space of Alischanz. In the work as a whole, there is no other figure who is perceived by way of all five senses: this emphasizes not only Vivianz' importance, but also the way in which the space which he dominates will be defined semantically through his body. This becomes particularly apparent by the way in which Wolfram uses olfaction here. Willehalm is not the only one to notice the smell emanating from Vivianz' body; the narrator will also describe this sweet smell, but only at the very moment of Vivianz' death:

*reht als lignaloe
al die boume mit viuwer wærn enzunt,
selh wart der smac an der stunt,
da sich lip und sele schiet.
sin hinvar alsus geriet (69,12)*

[Such fragrance was there when his body and his soul parted from one another, as though all lignum aloe trees had been set alight. Thus did he make his journey thence].

At the moment his soul departs this world for Paradise (at his death), the perception of Vivianz' body again determines the way in which the space at Alischanz is understood: the *odor sanctitatis* which is noted by both Willehalm and the narrator provides the audience with clear proof of Vivianz' sanctity – and it also emphasizes the transcendental character of the battlefield. Alischanz thereby becomes not only a space of Christian struggle, but also of Christian sacrifice and martyrdom – an extension of Paradise on earth.

Wolfram has underpinned the spatial connection between Vivianz and Alischanz using another poetic device, since he links the two names in an Alischanz-Vivianz leitmotiv-rhyme: in the 12,000 rhyming couplets which make up the poem as a whole, Wolfram has rhymed these two words more often with each other than with any other word (Greenfield

1992: 157). Thus, the mention of either of these two names (Alischanz-Vivianz) will naturally remind the audience of the other, creating an interrelationship between both, thereby emphasizing their mythical link on this level.

In my conclusion I would now like briefly to summarize my findings. I have attempted to examine the way in which Wolfram has used space in his *Willehalm* epos: I hope to have shown the extent to which the correlation of the concept of space with that of the body can be profitable for the analysis of this poem. It has become clear that it would be wrong to try and find 'naturalistic' elements for the constitution of space in this – or indeed in any – work of the courtly period. The spatial organization here is characterised by specifically medieval thinking patterns: this can be seen clearly in the way in which Wolfram has structured the end of the first battle. Furthermore, the analysis has shown how the spatial organisation of the work plays an important role in the characterisation of the figures and their relations to each other. The connection established between space, body and perception is particularly interesting: this is to be seen in the way in which Wolfram has, in his text, made use of all five senses at the scene of Vivianz' death, in order to constitute spatial meaning and create a spatial myth.

This spatial myth, linking Vivianz to Alischanz, will be reinforced and instrumentalized in the rest of the action of the poem, leading Christian knights to follow in Vivianz's footsteps on the battlefield, attempting thereby to reach Paradise through their own martyrdoms – and it is this desire for martyrdom which, in the final analysis, leads to the Christian victory. In the same way that in the Grail myth (the creation of which was due in no little part to Wolfram in his *Parzival* romance), the search for the supernatural Grail Castle becomes a quest and is thereby seen as the *primum movens* (primary motive force) for so many knights within the fictional universe of the courtly romance, so too the existence of the now metaphysically charged myth of the Alischanz battlefield becomes a motivation for Christian knights in their fight against Islam. The constitution of this now mythologised space impacts on the rest of the action of the poem and leads – through violent acts of revenge – to the ultimate Christian victory at the second battle. This is not only the case in Wolfram's poem, but is also in those works which continue and develop the

Alischanz myth in medieval German literature, as the place of Vivianz's Christian martyrdom – among them Ulrich von dem Türlin's *Arabel* or Ulrich von Türlin's *Rennewart*.

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NOTES

¹ In an as yet unpublished study by Kasten on the category of space in Gottfried's *Tristan*, Kasten has used as a starting point Zumthor's (1993) arguments on the corporeality of the perception of space.

² In both her 2005 and her 2014 studies, Lechtermann has also discussed Wolfram's *Willehalm*: in her 2005 article, her argument concentrated on the court scene at Munleun; in her 2014 discussion, the importance of movement on the Alischanz battlefield was central. My own discussion takes account of Lechtermann's findings.